

4. A TRUSTING CROW

Yesterday while I was sitting reading on the veranda of my house, a common crow (*Corvus splendens*) flew in and alighted quite close to me. This unusually deliberate act on its part made me curious. On examining, I was able to find that the crow had a small metal ring pressed around the lower half of its beak, quite close to its base, causing slight bleeding and preventing it from closing the beak. I approached the crow, which made not the least sign of fear, and holding it by hand removed the ring. Without any delay the crow flew out. I wonder whether there is any other record of this kind. A probable explanation is that, by long association with man, the crow has come to believe in his essential dignity; at least it is fascinating to think so.

MARINE BIOLOGICAL LAB.,

TRIVANDRUM-7,

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5. SPINY BABBLERS IN KATHMANDU VALLEY

On our day off last week, my wife and I headed for the haunts of the Spiny Babbler [*Turdoides nipalensis* (Hodgson)]. We picked up Dr. Das in Kathmandu, drove past the King's palace, and seven miles northward to Buda Nilkantha Narain with its new white-washed walls trimmed with terra cotta. There we made a right angle turn toward the west and zigzagged for three miles up through a pine forest and scrub jungle to Tokha Sanatorium and the doctor's bungalow. From his lawn we looked down from our 5800 feet to the Kathmandu Valley below. The Sanglakhola on the right meandered through lush, green rice fields to meet the Vishnumati on our left and disappeared behind familiar landmarks of modern Kathmandu—Bhim Sen Tower, the Tundikhel, and Phurtli Sarak.

By mid-morning, monsoon clouds lay above and below us. Armed with binoculars and vasculum and accompanied by our little white Tibetan apso 'Jhapu', we paused at the end of the terrace to get direction. Yes, the 'Spinys' were calling both to the right and to the left, so we picked our way down through a grove of young pines (*Pinus longifolia*), past corn fields, to a hill-side of scrub *Symplocos*, *Rhododendron*, and laurel, shrubs of *Phyllanthus* and *Osbeckia*, over patches of grass brightened with yellow *Hypoxis* and beds of *Selaginella*.

Half way there we came upon an improvised shrine beside a

running brook. A *pujari* was chanting before a platform of large, multi-coloured dahlias, supported by rows of fruit. A group of villagers sat around him, many of whom grasped scrawny chickens.

A hundred yards beyond, a 'spiny' began to sing and was immediately answered by birds in two other directions. We came to a little rise and scanned the bushes and young trees across a ravine. Sure enough, there sat our bird near the top of a twelve-foot pine tree, facing us. He would tilt his head back, hold his tail fairly still and warble for several seconds. He would bend forward, flicking his head and tail slowly from side to side, then straighten up and sing again. There were really two parts to his song: the first was quiet and confidential, the second loud and clear. Initially he seemed to imitate a bulbul, a streaked laughing thrush, and a kestrel, his notes were so varied. But as he swung into the emphatic part of his refrain, the notes were more characteristically 'spiny'.

After the song had been in progress for about three minutes, a second bird flew into the lower branches of the same tree. Its attitude was like that of a Whitethroated Laughing Thrush [*Garrulax albogularis albogularis* (Gould)], with tail bent down and wings flopping open as the head and tail jerked from side to side. It soon 'branch-hopped' upward and sat close to the first bird which flared open its tail and shivered for an instant. The breast of the newcomer was of a distinctly darker shade. The second bird moved about continually, sidling out and back along the branch while the first bird kept his original place. Finally the second one seemed to persuade the first they had an engagement elsewhere, so one after another they 'branch-hopped' vertically downward to the lowest limb of the tree and flew with rapid wing beats to a bush farther into the ravine. We heard two or three calls before all was quiet.

On our way back up the hill we stood at the edge of a corn field and heard still other 'spiny's' a quarter of a mile away. We saw brown crickets, tan dragonflies, and a black-and-white day moth with a red body among the foliage. Coral and gill mushrooms lined the path while silver lip (*Cheilanthes farinosa*) and lady ferns (*Athyrium pectinatum*) lined overhanging banks. Along a water course grew a single lily-of-the-valley (*Ophiogopon*) hedged about with Christmas ferns (*Polystichum squarrosum*). Rocks of quartz lay among loose earth glinting with mica.

As we came back past the shrine, four small children played among the debris. The flowers were splashed with blood while the hillside was strewn with fresh feathers, but the fruit was gone. A

kite (*Milvus l. lineatus*) slowly wheeled about the spot where the villagers had sacrificed to 'Ban-Kali', Goddess of the Forest, for rain and a good harvest.

A ray of sun broke through white clouds and lit up the rice fields. Another spiny called from the spur to the east. It was strange that no one had recorded this bird from the Valley for 114 years until we found it first at Nagarjung, then on Sheopuri, Negarkot, and Lele. It is the common babbler of the scrub jungle on the hills surrounding Kathmandu.

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6. COMMUNAL NEST-FEEDING IN BABBLERS

In a Miscellaneous Note on the parasitic habits of the Pied Crested Cuckoo in Volume 40, p. 125, I remarked on a case of four members of a gang of Jungle Babblers feeding young in one and the same nest. I thought I had enlarged on this elsewhere but do not seem to have done so. At one particular moment I could see a babbler flying away from the nest having just fed the young, another was now on the rim parting with food, a third was waiting near by in a nim tree, the fourth arrived on the roof of the bungalow a short distance away. I waited till Nos. 3 and 4 had also fed the young. This was in Bareilly, but I have seen three of these babblers feeding the young in a nest as far away as Madras.

In the Pied Crested Cuckoo note I referred to Jungle Babblers feeding two young cuckoos moving about together and wondered whether the young cuckoos were out of the same or different nests—they looked the same age incidentally—of the same party of babblers. However, I think this is the place to point out that I never succeeded in finding two nests of the Jungle Babbler in use at the same time, that is, in an area in which I could say they belonged to the same gang. In fact I have a strong suspicion, supported by a certain amount but insufficient evidence for certainty, that the pairs in a gang nest consecutively and not concurrently. If I am right, this is not a negation of the synchronized nesting idea but merely an adaptation of it which might well be of considerable value in the case of these gregarious birds. I would also add that I have no reason at all to believe that two or more females ever lay their eggs in the same nests as Mr.